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FILE ONLY

CASEY'S STRIKEOUT

Shattered confidence in CIA competence

OUR readers may recall the heated debate held recently in The Washington Post and other newspapers (The Times, Nov. 22) by William J. Casey and Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn.

Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, accused Durenberger of conducting congressional oversight of the intelligence community "off the cuff through the news media." Durenberger responded that "if the people are to know that the oversight process is working, they must be kept informed."

Durenberger, who is chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, also observed that "in Casey's view, the cost of public discussion is too high, and therefore the public has no right to know how effectively the CIA does its job . . ."

Shocking disclosures in recent days about Larry Wu-twi Chin have made a mockery of Casey's case for keeping the public in the dark.

Government documents filed since Chin was arrested Nov. 22 and accused of longtime spying for China described him simply as an interpreter and retired employee of the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

But senior intelligence officials now admit that, far from being merely a low-level translator, Chin had access to virtually every top-secret U.S. intelligence report on Asia for at least two decades.

Chin served as a document-control officer during much of his CIA career, channeling highly classified Asian reports throughout the U.S. intelligence apparatus. The damage he has done was described as extraordinary and lasting.

The Chin case is only one — but apparently by far the most damaging — of a recent rash of espionage arrests or embarrassing disclosures. There is some comfort, but not nearly enough, in the fact that the alleged spying by Chin and some of the others arrested was uncovered by U.S. counterintelligence.

One cannot recall a time since the Rosenberg giveaways of atom-bomb secrets in the 1940s when the American public stood in greater need of reassurance as to the competence of U.S. intelligence agencies.

What better place to look for answers than to congressional oversight?